

Miscellaneous Department.

MEALA AND CHRISTINE,
OR
THE POWER OF CASTE.

Translated for THE STANDARD from the French of XAVIER ETIENNE.

[CONCLUDED.]

There was a moment of mutual silence, during which Armand confounded the features of his companion. The examination continued the suspiciousness that had already flashed across his mind. Compared with the fair skin of Christine and that of the other white females of the country, Meala's complexion betrayed a dark tinge, which had been obscured under the pallid air of France; but the burning sky of the Antilles had revealed it in all its natural vigor. Other features less characteristic now clearly revealed to Armand that Meala, fair as she was, belonged to the class of *femmes de couleur* a title eternally preserved to them, who have far back their origin may be traced, and to whom strongly opposed outward circumstances may be to this designation.

Armand had well learned this during the week he had moved in colonial society, and fully appreciated the emotion Meala had at the bitter tears she shed at meeting him, and the embarrassment she manifested in his presence. She was the first, however, to break the silence.

"I should like to be in Martinique, Monsieur," said she. "But I was not aware that I had the pleasure of meeting you, Mademoiselle." Armand replied; "and if I had known you were here, truly I, I should have had the honor of paying you my respects at this time."

"This is language," sobbed Meala, extending her hand to Armand with a sorrowful smile, "this language that I never expected to hear from the lips of a creole! I thank you from the depths of my heart."

"Why does it surprise you? Are you not accustomed?"

"To hear and see myself respected? No, Monsieur."

"The words of my negroes, Nanette, should have been sufficient to inform you that I was not here a woman as others are. My mother died giving me birth, and I have no father, although my father lives; the name I bear is neither his nor my own. I am not called Mademoiselle Fournier in Martinique, but simply Meala, the Malabarress. You have not yet lived long enough in this country, Monsieur, to know what this epithet signifies; but I who have suffered, six long weeks, all the tortures of hell, I well understand what it means. It is meaning this, Monsieur: that custom forbids any white person passing my door to salute me; that if any one enters this house, it is to insult me and treat me as a contessa; that every white woman who meets me in the street scorns me from head to foot, and smiles with disdain upon me, if not with contempt."

"Infamous!" exclaimed Armand, rising with indignation.

"And more, Monsieur de Puisgourdin," continued Meala; "the people of my own caste and color, with few exceptions, hate me, and are jealous of me; the women despise and abhor me, perhaps, because I am not like the most of them, a base woman; the men because they pretend that I affect an equality with the whites. In short, upon whatever side I turn, I am wounded against the sharp points of a cruel fate."

"But the brilliant education you have received in France. This intelligence, this beautiful soul, which beams from your eyes, your charms and pretences, this elevation of feeling and sentiment—which to women is a superb treasure—and which few possess to the same extent as yourself—have they not seemed to you respect, admiration, and love from all?"

"All this has only served to aggravate my situation. If I had resembled my own class, the white men would have respected me and the women protected me; and the people of my caste would have treated me with attention. It is only a very plain I should give offence to none."

"But Monsieur de Puisgourdin, at this hour your horse stands at my door; it is known that you are here."

"Well, what matters it?" said Armand.

"At this instant," replied Meala, "the whole town are counting the number of minutes you are spending in my house, and—"

"I shall be the cause of calamity against you," cried Armand.

"Do not distress yourself for me," replied Meala, "but think of yourself."

"And why?"

"Because it will be told to Mlle Christine Eabilhane, and represented in such a light that it may prevent your marriage."

"My marriage?" said Armand.

"It is reported that you are engaged to Mlle Christine," replied Meala, "and that the betrothal dinner is to be in three days."

"This is disposing of me quickly, without my consent," said Armand. "But in my turn, Mlle Christine Eabilhane, since you have mentioned the name of Christine, permit me a question."

"I divide it and answer you," replied Meala. "Mlle Eabilhane and I have met but once, and then she turned me out of her house."

"Impossible!" cried Armand, stamping the ground in a rage.

"But true, Monsieur."

"But your hearts were united by the most beautiful friendship in Paris?"

"A common misfortune had bound us together. Both of us had been sent to Paris, to receive our education; neither of us were known there; we had been committed to the care of the superintendence of the same convent; some of our school companions had interested their mothers in our cruel isolations, and they persuaded us to go into society with their daughters, through the holidays."

"Schoolmates as we were, without knowing any distinction of colour or origin, we had vowed an eternal friendship, whose links a common misfortune had joined."

"Christine left Paris for Aix-en-Provence. Two hours after my arrival, I hastened to Christine, hoping to find in her loving heart a solace for all my wrongs and the cruel fate to which I was doomed. It happened at this moment she was entertaining guests in the parlor. I ran towards her with open arms. She repelled my eager salutation, asking me to go to her chamber, where she would join me when her friends had departed."

"What haesness."

"The white girl could not receive into her house the colored school-mate."

"Has she done nothing to atone for this heartlessness?"

"Nothing."

"Has she made no effort to see you?"

"Never."

This explained to Armand Christine's cold reserve and reply, the evening before, at the fete, when he spoke of Meala.

"What a stupid society here in Martinique," exclaimed Armand to himself, hastily pacing the floor.

"And I am not able to make my destiny with a woman whose heart is black, whose indifference is so limited, and whose spirit is so impulsive."

"Indeed," added Armand to Meala, "I have a friend, a college mate, who is in *hommes de couleur*, and a magistrate at Port Royal. Am I to be desbarred the privilege, when I see him, as I intend to do in two or three days, of clasping him in my arms?"

"You are lost if you do it," murmured Meala.

"I shall do it," Armand coolly replied, "for I have a great heart myself."

Then, seating himself by Meala's side, he took her hands in his own, and kissed them respectfully. "Meala," said he, "you have neither friend, counselor, nor brother in this country. Will you allow me to take the place of all these?"

The young girl buried her face in her hands; then, falling upon her knees before Armand, she murmured between her sobs a scarcely audible reply.

"Oh, oh, oh, many thanks; but no, I cannot permit it," added she, quietly lifting her head.

"Xenon your bright future, your proud name, your life perhaps; I cannot permit it."

"Go, leave me, M. de Puisgourdin, I will pray for you. I will be truly grateful to you, but you must want me."

Before Armand could detain her, Meala had fled. Turning, he found himself facing one of his friends, M. Leon de Chalons.

"I was seeking you, Armand, and having learned you were here, I turned in."

"Who told you I was here?"

"Your horse, paraben, which has stood at the gall three hours. Pestle! My friend, when you run after two hours, you should select good ground."

"Hugh, Monsieur," replied Armand, in a tone so severe that Loon feared to utter another word. "But what do you want of me?"

"I was about to propose a Marseillaise, of which you are so fond, and where you lose with such a wonderful grace."

"I am not in a mood to enjoy this evening, I thank you."

Armand mounted his horse and returned to the Rue de Madelaine, sad and thoughtful. It was already dark.

Meala was not mistaken. Half of Saint Pierre already knew where Armand had spent his evening, and the time he remained at the house of Meala, the "militaires."

Some, jealous in case of success, others envious of his double good fortune, had reported this occurrence with wonderful additions. Armand's father and Rabihue were the first informed of it; both seriously represented that he was scandalizing himself in visiting Meala.

To both he replied with the respect which their mutual positions demanded of him, but with the dignity which a consciousness of having done his duty inspired.

There still remained a third person to whom he wished to explain himself; it was Christine.

"But," replied he, "I know where to find seconds in this affair."

The next day, accordingly, two young men of color, one a magistrate, the other an artillery officer, passed his furlough in Martinique, both worthy of occupying honorable rank, but under the ban of society, on account of their colour, were employed to arrange the conditions of personal renown, now inevitable between Armand and Chalons. Whatever repugnance Chalon's second son felt at finding themselves in contact with these two men, they were obliged to conceal it.

The speculator of this scene remained silent, which is rare under similar circumstances in this colonial society.

It was very significant to Armand.

"What do you say, Monsieur?" said Armand.

"I rejoice to think, Mademoiselle," said Armand, "and to hope, that the ties of friendship are sacred to you. I am accustomed to judge of men, and women too, by the warmth with which they cherish gratitude of heart. When one remembers these childish affections which have thrown a blessed and beautiful light upon his pathway, I conceive of that man the highest opinion."

When, on the contrary, these early memories are darkened by a cloud of respect or forgetfulness, I confess that, in my turn, I repay those forgetfulness by contempt."

"But, Monsieur, I do not understand you," stammered Armand.

"You shall understand me," replied Armand. "How have you treated Mlle Meala Fournier? How did you welcome her when she presented herself to you, the friend of your girl, in confusion."

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